



## **MICHIGAN PARALYZED VETERANS OF AMERICA**

*A member Chapter of Paralyzed Veterans of America*

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## **MICHIGAN PARALYZED VETERANS OF AMERICA**

**House Veterans Affairs & Homeland Security Committee**

**Testimony — Senate Bill 302 & 303**

**June 7, 2005**

**Presented by Michael F Harris, Deputy Executive Director**

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### **OUR MISSION**

The mission of Michigan Paralyzed Veterans of America is to enhance the lives of veterans with spinal cord injury or disease as well as all citizens with disabilities, by advocating for civil rights, assuring quality health care, supporting continued research and education, and encouraging independence and healthy living through various health, sports and recreational programs. MPVA shall continue striving to remain at the forefront of both veterans' benefits services and disability rights, while working toward a better quality of life for all American citizens.

## **MICHIGAN PARALYZED VETERANS OF AMERICA**

Chairman Garfield, members of the House Veterans Affairs & Homeland Security Committee, Michigan Paralyzed Veterans of America (MPVA) is pleased to support significant legislation that allows disabled veterans and people with disabilities an opportunity to realize their full potential while becoming financially self-supporting.

Our nation's veterans fought to preserve the American dream of freedom and prosperity. But we failed to help many patriots who wanted to start their own businesses and did not receive the support they needed. It's simple: veterans deserve a piece of the American dream they fought so hard to protect. To address this problem, legislation passed the Michigan Senate that encourages the state to award more of its purchasing contracts to qualified disabled veterans.

Senate Bill 303 would require that preference in awarding state contracts be given to qualified disabled veterans. It would also set a goal that not less than 3% of total state expenditures for construction, goods, and services are awarded to qualified disabled veterans.

In 1988, the State welcomed Public Act 112, the Business Opportunity Act for Persons with Disabilities. The act provided a competitive opportunity for business-owners with disabilities in their ability to bid for state procurements of goods, services, and construction. The act required - it didn't suggest, it required - that the Department of Management and Budget report to the Legislature at five year intervals about its progress towards goals for awarding state contracts to persons with disabilities.

Yet 17 years later they have never provided the Legislature with even one such report, not one report on the actions specified in Public Act 112, despite the fact it is required by law.

To rectify that, and to ensure that the law is followed to its fullest extent, Senate Bill 302 would require such reports to be provided to the Legislature not less than twice a year. In addition, the report would include the number of businesses owned by persons with disabilities that applied for a state contract, the number of these businesses that received a contract, and whether or not the department has achieved its goal for awarding state contracts to persons with disabilities.

Even when the economy was strong, three-fourths of the people with moderate to severe disabilities remained unemployed. Not surprisingly, people with disabilities see small business ownership as their chance for economic self-sufficiency. Self-employment is never easy, and there are increased challenges when the business owner has disabilities. Business owners with disabilities need to find ways to operate their businesses successful in a competitive environment.

Perhaps the most difficult time for a small business is at its beginning. Allowing sole source contracts to service-disabled veteran-owned businesses offers the jump start needed to develop a new business. This opportunity is not a hand-out and is only available to those businesses that can successfully provide the contracted services, and provide them at a fair and reasonable price. But these provisions will only be successful if contracting officers are strongly encouraged to provide contracts to service-disabled veteran-owned businesses at the 3% goal the language in the legislation allows.

At this point, however, we must raise a disagreement. We certainly support legislation that gives preference to disabled veterans when awarding state contracts. But we cannot agree with this effort to distinguish between veterans to determine who gets the contract. We do not believe that special consideration should be given just because a veteran served in a combat zone or a so-called "hazardous duty area."

Does the State really mean to send the message that the soldier who risks life and limb and comes home whole should now be penalized for disability that occurred at a later date? Does the State really mean that those veterans who stood side by side on our behalf should now be judged differently based on when and how a life-changing illness or injury occurred?

As it formulated Bill 303, the State was not asked to assume the responsibilities or standards of the Veterans Administration used to determine qualifications for health-related services and benefits.

The State is asked, in every Bill it considers, to assume the responsibility and standards of the people of Michigan who are far less willing to judge one disabled veteran against another. As such, we believe that any veteran with a disability should be considered eligible for participation in the programs discussed in Bill 303.

There is growing and unhealthy, discriminatory trend, to differentiate between veterans who served in a combat theater and those who did not. MPVA is hopeful that amendments can be added that eliminate classification of veterans by such standards.

Though not every veteran is called to serve in a combat theater, every veteran was willing to serve and by eliminating those disabled veterans whose disability did not occur in a combat theater, you tarnish both the service and the success experienced by our retired and now disabled veterans.

As we continue to fight the war on terror and our economy continues to stumble, employment is more of a challenge for all of our citizens. We have a continuing obligation to ensure that those who serve our country can hope for a smooth and successful transition to civilian life when they return home.

Michigan's military personnel deserve every assistance, whether through gainful employment or small business opportunities. It is one more way that our State, and our Nation, can express its gratitude and thanks.

This concludes my statement. I would be pleased to address any questions or comments that you or other members of the panel may have. Thank you, again, for the opportunity to present our remarks.